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# ART AND PROGRESS

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SIR FRANCIS RENOUNCES HIS EARTHLY INHERITANCE

A PAINTING BY GIOTTO IN THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO, ASSISI

## GIOTTO IN SPITE OF HIS TIMES

A PHILOSOPHY OF DECORATION MORE SUITABLE TO THE  
TWENTIETH CENTURY THAN TO THE RENAISSANCE

BY ROSSITER HOWARD

WHEN Italy awoke after the Dark Ages her two wisest men were artists. Dante has told us his philosophy through the art of letters; Giotto has left his in colors. There is one thread in the development of his thought which it may be interesting to trace, for the growth of his style of decoration is opposite to that of all the other great painters until near the end of the nineteenth century.

Giotto began as a youthful and enthusiastic story-teller, using every resource of his primitive technique to bring us into the presence of his characters; he ended as a great decorator, wise enough to see that his churchly dramas lost nothing of their power by frank subordination to the architecture. The other painters attempted with increasing success to make their walls do duty as win-

dows through which we look at their scenes; so that to this day the architect seems jealous of the wall-painter, who he fears will distract attention from the building.

Let us look at one of Giotto's earliest works among the stories from the life of St. Francis at Assisi—the fresco of Francis renouncing his earthly inheritance. Francis's father has brought him before the bishop to disinherit this worthless son who wastes his time in madness instead of attending to his father's drygoods business; the young man strips himself and, returning his clothes to his father, says, "Until this hour I have called Pietro Bernardone my father; henceforth I desire to say only 'Our Father Who art in heaven.'" There are plenty of errors in drawing, but the artist has told his story with vigor; and, what is more to our point just now, he has used every means in his power to make the space seem deep by the unlimited crowd of spectators and the absurd buildings set catercornered in order to make us think away the wall on which the picture is painted. The harmony of lines is, if imperfect, both beautiful and original; but so forceful is the drawing of the characters that Giotto's ability in composition is too frequently overlooked.

The picture is characteristic of the series. The church wall is divided into stupidly shaped panels, evidently considered as so many pages on which to write stories, and framed with painted borders which have little enough relation with the size and shape of the panels. Within these spaces Giotto has painted pictures excellent in composition but chiefly effective as illustrations, in which clear narrative and character-drawing have been strengthened by every available means, including a primitive and confused perspective.

Giotto shows himself here, at the beginning of his career, to be a true Florentine, the embryo of Leonardo da Vinci, who wrote nearly two hundred years later, "The first object of a painter is to make a simple flat surface appear like a relief, with some of its parts detached

from the ground; he who excels all others in that part of art deserves the greatest praise." That is simply a crude statement of the Florentine instinct to make their representations of figures seem solid and real, communicating to us their vitality, almost always at the service of the ultimate aim that through our realization of the figure we feel the life of the character. This instinct guided the Florentine painters indiscriminately in easel pictures and wall-painting. Now there can be no doubt that he who makes a flat wall look like a relief, no matter with what purpose, destroys its quality as a wall; and certainly Giotto at this earlier period of his work was trying with all his might to accomplish this end.

The next great work of Giotto was in the Arena chapel at Padua. Here the painter marked off the walls in the same uninteresting way, but filled his panels with more mature and more powerful pictures. "The Bewailing of Christ" illustrates the point I wish to bring out. The message is clear, as before, and the expression intense. There are few pictures in the world that have greater dramatic power. The artist has learned something, too, about drawing the human figure; though many a student in a modern academy would look down on him from his own superior correctness. But most important to our discussion is the stride that Giotto has taken in the co-ordination of line and movement, and his corresponding control over our eye and attention. The edges of his panel this time do not cut off the picture, but finish it. The panel is less a window through which we look at a scene, and more the chosen surface upon which and within which his great melodic lines sing like the voices in an ancient requiem. His representation of depth is less insistent than it was at Assisi; and in the pictures of this series that contain architecture, though the buildings are still set diagonally, they do not so much carry our attention into a detached background. It is this tendency, to forego the roominess of nature in order to relate his thought with that of the builder, which sets Giotto apart from all the other painters



THE DEATH OF ST. FRANCIS, BY GIOTTO, BARDI CHAPEL, CHURCH OF SANTA CROCE, FLORENCE

of the scientific age that began with the dawn of the Renaissance.

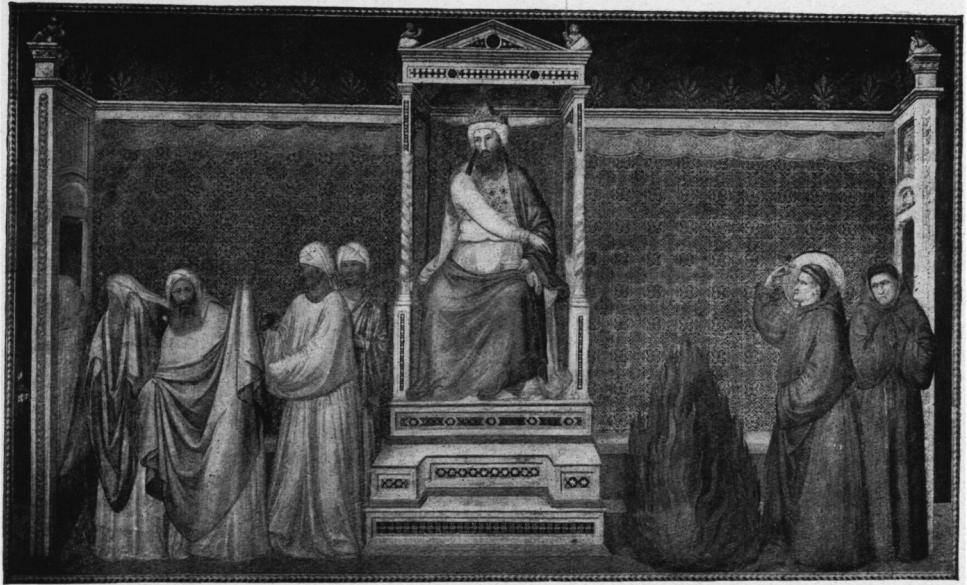
And now let us turn to the painter's last great works, the Peruzzi and the Bardi chapels in the church of Santa Croce at Florence. As we walk up the nave of the church we feel the strongest contrast between the incoherence of the wall-decorations by later painters in the choir and the tranquil clarity of the two little chapels at the right. Ruskin likens the decorative quality of the Bardi chapel to that of an Etruscan vase, and he quotes Crowe regarding the composition of the greatest of these frescoes, "The Death of St. Francis": "No painter ever produced its equal except Raphael, nor could better be created except in so far as regards improvement in the rendering of form." But Ruskin is not satisfied that Crowe should speak of the work as "the composition of a scene" instead of as "the conception of a fact," and he continues with a decisive argument in favor of Giotto's supreme spiritual vision. Ruskin has carried his point; and today there are few who do not recognize Giotto's power in communicating his message, though there are many who attribute the power to his primitive simplicity, like that of a child who tells his

story with conviction because he is not encumbered with literary knowledge and ambition. Whatever the reason, Giotto has set forth his message so forcefully that it is easy to overlook the fact that he never for a moment forgot the "Etruscan vase" he was decorating. Against all the tendency of his times away from Byzantine flat surfaces toward modern representation of objects in their surrounding space, Giotto here discards his earlier attempts at depth. His perspective becomes slight and inconspicuous, upright lines are strongly emphasized at the sides and horizontal lines at the top and bottom of his panels. The panels themselves are no longer like the pages of a book, mere surfaces on which to tell his stories, but are beautifully proportioned parts of the wall; and the wall-feeling is not lessened but enhanced by his paintings.

Furthermore, his dramas have lost nothing in power through the sacrifice; rather they have gained. For our vision, instead of finding interest "up stage," is held by the characters, as in an Elizabethan setting.

The other great Renaissance painters advanced the other way.

Raphael achieved a triumph of decora-



ST. FRANCIS BEFORE THE SULTAN, BY GIOTTO. BARDI CHAPEL, CHURCH OF SANTA CROCE, FLORENCE

tive art with his "Parnassus," in the first of the rooms he painted in the Vatican, the "Stanza della Segnatura." The sense of depth is restrained and the surface-feeling fine. To be sure, he drew into some of these frescoes a deep perspective, but the narrow gamut of his light and shadow and the misty pallor of his colors laid on the fresh plaster let one's eyes play readily over the wall-surface. In the next room, the "Stanza d'Elidoro," the shadows are deeper and the feeling of relief much stronger. And in the third room, showing the "Coronation of Charlemagne" (never mind if it was executed by his pupils, it was done under his direction), added to still deeper shadows, we find the diagonal construction which had been discarded by Giotto. It looks as though Raphael's theory, if he had any, were not far from that of Leonardo, aiming for the illusion that a scene takes the place of the wall. This purpose was doubtless strengthened by the example of Michelangelo's great sculpturesque figures painted on the Sistine ceiling and uncovered while Raphael was at work on these rooms.

The name of Michelangelo evokes almost universally a sort of veneration, yet how often we hear of intelligent

persons who are disappointed at the appearance of the Sistine chapel? I have heard one of the most successful American painters grumble that the Sistine ceiling "looks like a collection of postage stamps"! The worst of it is, this irreverent critic is largely right. The very culmination of Christian painting makes this ceiling look patchy—until we examine separately its sublime panels.

With Ghirlandajo, Benozzo Gozzoli, Fra Angelico, and the still earlier painters, it is the same; as they learned the appearance of things in this material world, their stage settings became deeper; so that we are in danger of assuming that the quality we have been seeking is one of only primitive art, that as soon as men learn better they do not wish it.

To find any evident intention of this surface quality I think we must return to Giotto. His development in this respect was just the reverse of Raphael's and that of the others. A comparison of his two frescoes of "St. Francis before the Sultan," the early one at Assisi and the later one at Florence, shows clearly the artist's change of intention. At Assisi the figures are distributed with almost as much thought forward and backward as right and left; at Florence they

are placed in harmonious group spots over the surface. At Assisi there are lines calculated to lead the imagination behind the figures, even back of the little crooked buildings; at Florence the lines all give stability to the panel, and the vision is led over the surface—in other words, depth is deliberately sacrificed to harmony of arrangement and to unity of surface feeling. The objects are not more but less detached from the ground; and Giotto, according to Leonardo's words and general Italian practice, has been developing backwards. Such sailing into the wind must have been caused by definite conviction. Certain it is that no painter until recently has been as faithful to his trust of contributing to the architectural thought.

Nearly seven hundred years later Puvis de Chavannes taught us the same lesson. Today there is a wide scattering of wall-paintings as decorative in purpose as those of Giotto and Puvis, and, in fact, a large number of other pictures just as flat for the mere love of pattern. Their authors want their lines and colors to sing instead of talk. This is based upon good psychology; we will only ask that these modern tunes, though different, be as genuinely musical as those of the Italians. During these days of rapid change in art fashions, it is good to remember the accomplishment of that great old man of the fourteenth century who made of his own thought the expressive garment of the builder's idea.



AFTERGLOW

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